

The Third Opinion

Leadership Means Picking The Right Fights

Saj-nicole Joni, 02.17.10, 03:12 PM EST

It's easy to overlook how crucial that is.



Dr. Saj-nicole Joni

When an editor at Forbes asked me to write something explaining why I just wrote a book called *The Right Fight* (with a co-author, Damon Beyer), a bigger question occurred to me. Why would anyone write any business leadership book these days? Certainly, given the challenging economics of publishing, not to make money.

The genesis of this book goes way back to my childhood, before I ever really thought about money. Studying piano at the Cleveland Institute of Music, I had the good fortune to work with members of the Cleveland Orchestra. It caught my attention that these great artists struggled each day to create their extraordinary art. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't just fun.

To create music they believed worthy, they had to dig deep, to fight inside themselves and with one another to get to something that went beyond technique and the written score, to something worthy of being called art.

I saw this again when I was a young professor of mathematics at MIT. In offices just down the hall from mine sat some of the world's best scientists, winners of the Nobel Prize, the Fields Medal in math and more. Yet each day they had to go to the edge of their own knowledge, to the places where they felt stupid or uncertain, and find a way to continue creating science and inventions, to lift knowledge and enhance people's lives. It wasn't always pretty. There were fights and constant tensions.

Coming full circle in my own career, after leading global organizations in key executive roles, I've spent the last decade and more as a confidential strategy advisor to chief executive officers and their teams. There, too, the path forward is always complex, with great uncertainty and considerable risk. Working with many different CEOs and C-suite executives, I've seen with certainty that you can't create and sustain breakthrough performance without productive dissent, conflict and diversity of views.

Yet no one talks about this. There are hundreds of books and workshops about how to get people working together—building trust, molding teams, creating shared vision and purpose. That isn't wrong; but it's only half of the equation. You can't win with a team that is badly aligned. That's like sailing in a boat where the mast isn't properly stepped. The problem is that alignment is not sufficient. Achieving alignment is not the end of a leader's job. It's merely the beginning. Because without the tensions of wind on the sail, and the passions of the crews that make it happen, you will never get anywhere useful, let alone win the race.

cont'd...

Worse yet, I saw that good leaders everywhere were afraid that conflict and dissonance meant that alignment was broken and should be fixed.

Getting this right matters. The executives at Toyota (TM - news - people) seem to have been aligned around the goal of protecting their company when reports of gas pedal acceleration were surfacing. They should have started a right fight to use every resource they had to find out what was wrong, stop selling flawed cars and save lives. Instead, they chose the wrong fight of convincing people that the problem was only about floor mats. Today, innocent people have been hurt and killed, sales have dropped dramatically, and Toyota could be facing the biggest auto recall in history. Think about it. Do you trust Toyota today?

Anyone reading this has probably worked in organizations where you've seen office battles that were wasteful, all about self-interest and sometimes even mean. You probably hated it. Those were wrong fights.

But what about fighting for something that really matters? Something like brand integrity, or innovation, or safety or the environment? Tension, difference and conflict are fundamentally human. Competing ideas and actions, when focused on important causes, with dignity and fair play, can lift all participants to achieve great things. Those are right fights.

Right fights enable us to do something no other species seems to be able to do: After all the disagreeing and competing and fighting, the way we can reach an outcome is not domination by one at the expense of everyone else. Rather, the group as a whole can find solutions that make life better. Sometimes they make life better for millions of people.

One night in Houston, my future co-author and I found ourselves in a passionate discussion about what it takes to lead in the 21st century. We talked about traits like the ability to understand complexity, analytic skills, savvy about people, being well-networked, integrity, but we kept coming back to a central truth they don't teach in business school, that a leader's job is to orchestrate the right fights and to make sure they are fought right.

We parted that night knowing we had committed to the long, hard path of writing a book together, a practical guide for leaders in all kinds of organizations, large, small, global, for-profit, not-for-profit, educational, arts-related, science-oriented. We knew we would have to comprehensively answer two central questions:

- How do you pick right fights?
- How do you make sure you fight them right?

It is a matter of a set of leadership skills that anyone and any team can learn and perfect, techniques for stopping fighting about all the things that really don't matter and starting fighting about the few things that really do, in a high-minded and respectful way. The world's challenges demand it of us, urgently.

How will you choose? Do you have the courage to fight for what really matters? And the wisdom to stop fighting about things that don't? Your choices will affect the lives of those around you and many you will never know, every day of your career.

...

Saj-nicole Joni, chief executive of Cambridge International Group, is an advisor to executives worldwide. The Right Fight, by Saj-nicole Joni and Damon Beyer, (HarperCollins, 2010) is available in book, e-book and audio formats.